



Experts in Asia's healthcare sector reveal their COVID action plans

Healthcare leaders map out response to the next pandemic

Several experts came together and discussed the pandemic's effects

This unprecedented time has hit the healthcare sector the most as the pandemic propelled medical facilities to adapt to changes in a race against time.

In the first-ever Healthcare Asia Virtual Conference, industry leaders laid out the changes that happened because of the crisis and mapped out the possible future of healthcare. Over 100 participants from the healthcare sector attended the conference, led by 10 speakers and panelists, and was moderated by Healthcare Asia's editor-in-chief, Tim Charlton.

Healthcare institutions' response to COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has made drastic changes in the health sector from patient care, employee safety, as well as adopting new technology to better service the 'new normal'.

ManilaMed has taken every

opportunity to improve process efficiency without compromising delivery, said **Dr Eduardo Esequé**, ManilaMed's medical director. Without careful management and strategy, delays and poor patient experience are to be expected.

Dr Esequé added that ManilaMed has launched the Feel Better campaign and has been taking advantage of available platforms in disseminating health protocols and segments.

The Philippine National Kidney and Transplant Institute (NKTI) has also undergone drastic changes, as laid out by executive director **Dr Rose Lique**, since NKTI is a transplant centre. Some of the measures they have implemented are admitting only renal emergencies, suspending organ donation and transplantation, outpatient pay and service, enforcing a skeletal workforce, and drafting the first NKTI COVID Manual.

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Some rooms were also converted to improvise negative pressure rooms, testing facilities were acquired, and tents were built on the hospital's parking lots. Another part of NKTI's transition to new normal is the launch of telemedicine, and its opening to non-renal medical and surgical cases.

On the other hand, The Medical City president and CEO **Dr Eugenio Jose Ramos** said the hospital gone by the 4As—agility, by identifying the core people who would call the shots in repurposing the floors of the hospital; adaptability, by being ready to admit both COVID and non-COVID patients; accountability, by taking care of the hospital staff; and making alliances, by collaborating with like-minded medical facilities such as the Pasig City Hospital.

The Medical City has also been implementing the Epidemic Response Team since 2014, born out of the

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hospital's experience with previous epidemics like the H1N1 virus, and it has greatly helped the hospital in dealing with COVID-19.

In 2014, TMC created the epidemic rapid response team, or ERRT, which had protocols and guidelines that would deal with epidemics. These protocols were born from experience in responding to the likes of H1N1 that spread into the Philippines last 2009.

"We had all these guidelines but after 2014 we kind of put it aside because there were no threats at that time," Ramos said.

Ramos added that TMC followed the reports of clustering in December 2019 and the spread of the virus in neighbouring countries such as Thailand. On 20 January, TMC's management preemptively activated the ERRT and started to talk about protocols and guidelines, as well as thinking in terms of a small-scale epidemic in the country.

"We were quite ready and then 30 January, the first case in the Philippines was reported and that jolted a lot of us, I think all of us, because we never expected it would reach the Philippines," he admitted.

TMC then started the annual mock drills for ERRT and began to focus on global communicable disease.

The Mary Mediatrix Medical Center also has PCR labs and tents built outside its premises.

"We have met a local government and the provincial health office. We have formed the private hospital associations here in Batangas so we can solve our issues," said **Dr Robert Magsino**, president and CEO of Mary Mediatrix Medical Center.

For **Dr Noel Yeo**, Parkway Pantai's senior vice president of hospital operations, Singapore operations division, there are three learnings imparted by the changes brought upon by the COVID-19 virus.

Firstly, digitise healthcare to minimise contact; secondly, diversify to alleviate disruption of supplies during the next pandemic; and thirdly, establish knowledge-sharing platforms for hospitals around Asia Pacific so they can share best practices amongst one another.

As for Bangkok Rayong Hospital, senior executive member **Dr**

Gunnaphon Anamnart suggested that medical facilities should equip their staff with PPEs, psychologists for mental health screening, and a charity corner for sharing food.

For the physical we provide the PPEs. For mental health we provide psychologists to provide screening. For socioeconomics, we have a charity corner. Since many supermarkets are closed, some employees didn't get to store food, so we provided a charity corner for sharing to them," said Anamnart, adding that aside from patients, employees should also be kept safe.

Hurdles and future paths

CEO of Pun Hlaing Hospital **Dr. Gershu Paul** said the private sector took a huge blow as they also dealt with not just one pandemic.

"The private sector was hit badly. We had to reconfigure our debt payments and cash flows. We have two pandemics, one the COVID and the one of the cancer, diabetes and infectious disease in our regions. Dealing with these are eye-openers in the sector," Paul said.

Clamors for universal healthcare systems are now louder than ever. Maintaining it financially is a challenge governments must face. KPMG director of healthcare and life sciences **Chris Hardesty** said that sustaining healthcare 15% of the GDP is an ideal to strive for.

"We need to be a lot more creative by creating risk schemes. We're looking at even crowdfunding, nationalized health savings accounts to encourage people to take accountability for their own healthcare. We should have a composite model like what Japan has done," Hardesty explained.

With enough funding several panelists agreed that the next step would be adopting technology to help the healthcare sector in areas such as telemedicine. Managing Director & Senior Partner at Boston Consulting Group **Zarif Munir** believes that priority for most organizations is health equity.

"We have seen that digital has proven to work at scale. Rather than go to a hospital, they'll enter the information digitally. We think that real world data can expand to have

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greater agility," Munir explained.

Medical Director and Consultant ENT Surgeon of Prince Court Medical **Datuk Dr. Kuljit Singh** agreed that most health spending will be technological upgrades.

"In Asia we see a load of patients flocking hospitals for treatment. Artificial intelligence is useful for diagnostic purposes. We just have to put these systems to guide doctors for diagnosis," Singh added

Preparation for the next pandemic

COVID-19 has changed the way medical facilities work and some of those changes are here to stay. According to Hardesty, the future of healthcare services requires great creativity, and there should be a shift from health-for-all (universal healthcare) to health-for-wealth (sustainability). Aside from the mindset shift, prevention should be a reality. "Investing in early detection and intervention is a method that pays for itself," he noted.

Hospitals should also be designed conveniently for patients, according to Singh. These smart hospitals should be built to adapt artificial intelligence, whilst being human-centric at the same time.

"Patients today look at value-based care, empathy and positive user experience, and [hospitals that] understand their needs and provide," Singh added.

Workflow charts should be reconstructed, added Anamnart. Hospitals must understand the nature of their staff and accept that there's no one-size-fits-all approach in managing their emotional needs.

For Liqueute, there's also a need to strengthen regional transplant centres and promote research.



The conference was held last 27 October